

COMMONWEALTH  
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## BOOKS

## Our hero vs. war, women and Washington

**P. S. Wilkinson**

C. D. B. BRYAN

Harper and Row, \$5.95

**BRIAN WILKIE**

In *P. S. Wilkinson*, the Harper Prize Novel for 1965, C. D. B. Bryan tells the story of Wilkinson's experiences in truce-time Korea (to which he carries an ROTC commission from Yale), his subsequent, tragi-comically unsuccessful attempts to find a place and meaningful human relationships in civilian life, and the ultimate fiasco of his being called up for a second round with the Army during the Berlin crisis.

He blunders through a quasi-affair with his former college sweetheart, now unhappily married, is rejected by the CIA because a lie-detector has somehow managed to label him a homosexual (the CIA is itself rather suspect on this score, the novel implies), is brutally roughed up during a desperate and misguided "sentimental journey" to old haunts in Baltimore's night-town district, cynically takes a job with a New York bank in order to have some institutional or occupational label to pin on himself, and then, ironically, finds himself re-absorbed by that paradigm of all "institutions," the Army. There, in the final episode of the novel, Wilkinson is forced to recognize that, despite his reluctance to rebel against institutions, their codes cannot be reconciled with his own confused but human moral imperatives.

Depending on what one believes a novel ought to be, one could either praise *P. S. Wilkinson* for not being ridden into the ground by its "theme" or attack it because it muddies its own waters by digressions and (on a smaller scale) incongruous witticisms which one suspects are in the book because the author just couldn't resist them. In any case, it is not always easy to decide when the novel is simply trying to tell

its hero's story and when it is trying to develop a structural idea. As I have already implied, the idea here seems to be the conflict between a man's own insights and standards and those that are officially imposed, whether by a tradition-defined Old Family, by a prep school that inflexibly worships its half-hollow Honor Code, by an Army that demands of its officers a ludicrous sense of noblesse, by government service, or by marriage. Thus most of the episodes in the book can be thought of as explorations either of personal dilemmas or of institutional ethics.

Oddly enough, in view of Bryan's sympathies and his point, he does better by institutions than by people, at least in making them convincing. He writes best when his subject is a well-defined milieu like the prep school or Baltimore or the Army; indeed, veterans of the peacetime Army will find that Bryan has portrayed truthfully and without satiric distortion the peculiar dreamlike misplacement of emphasis that consistently characterizes Army life.

But when Bryan tries to show people acting and feeling he often fails pretty badly. Many of these scenes are written in soap-opera prose and dialogue—not so much the old radio type as the new and relatively sophisticated television type: "What's wrong, Cynthia?" "Oh, nothing. . . . Everything! It's all wrong! We're wrong! What's happened to us? Oh, sure, don't you see?" Bryan didn't write that and is never that bad, but he comes close, as in the following: "Phil?" Linda asked quietly. "Yes?" "Phil, what's the matter with us?" "What do you mean, 'what's the matter with us?'" "I mean—oh, I don't know. I mean, there's just something the matter with us, that's all." Admittedly people do sometimes talk that way, especially people who go to plays, but that only helps prove the paradox that what is pre-

sented accurately doesn't always seem real, much less interesting.

Wilkinson himself sometimes comes alive, especially when he has a well-defined scene to move in, and so do certain minor characters like a group of Baltimore prostitutes, but the other people are almost astonishingly featureless. Hilary, the hero's sweetheart, is my nomination for the most perfectly blank, most nearly nonexistent human being in fiction.

For all this, *P. S. Wilkinson* is a readable book. It moves; and I can think of many more skillfully written novels that don't. Bryan doesn't think it is contemptible or beneath his dignity to tell a story, and if I haven't praised his novel enough for doing that, it's because critics are still as far as ever from being able to explain sheer narrative skill. (Imagery and themes and structure, yes; story-telling, no.) Whatever the limits of his psychological insight, Bryan can narrate, and that is one sign that he may be back with a better book some time soon.